Denis Villeneuve's Arthouse Space Opera: *Dune: Parts One* and *Two*

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Résumé

Denis Villeneuve's career trajectory brought him from making independent arthouse films in French in Québec to blockbuster science-fiction films in Hollywood. This article explores in particular Villeneuve's adaptation of Frank Herbert's novel, *Dune* (1965), a novel he admits resonated particularly for him as a teenager in Québec in the 1980s. It analyzes how Villeneuve's career trajectory and film style led to his financially and critically successful adaptation, which combines the blockbuster techniques of space opera with his signature arthouse approach. It looks in particular how Villeneuve's adaptation of *Dune: Part One* and *Dune: Part Two* reflects preoccupations that are both global in scope and also intimately related to his identity as Québécois.

Mots-clés: Denis Villeneuve, *Dune*, film adaptation, science-fiction film.

> *Dune* was always an allegorical novel; sci-fi's ability to hold up a mirror darkly is one of its primary aims. But *Dune* the film has somehow become part of the world for me.
>
> — Helen Macdonald[1]
>
> The bottom line in the *Dune* trilogy is beware of heroes.
>
> — Frank Herbert[2]

Dreams play a central role in Denis Villeneuve's *Dune: Part One* (2021), from its opening epigraph, "Dreams are messages from the deep," to stylish sequences of its hero Paul Atreides's dreams, to his mentor Duncan Idaho's assertion that: "Dreams make good stories. But everything important happens when we're awake. Because that's when we make things happen." As various reviewers and interviewers have observed,[3] Denis Villeneuve realized his own adolescent dream by adapting Frank Herbert's *Dune* (1965) to the big screen. The filmmaker explains the novel's impact:

> I found myself engaged in Paul Atreides' journey as a teenager struggling to find his identity in a world surrounded by family heritage and politics, and ultimately finding solace in Fremen culture. I was mesmerized by that and by the ecosystems. I love nature; for me, nature is everything. The way Frank Herbert created ecosystems and depicted their relationship with humanity, the way the Fremen dance with nature—I was in love with that. I was the target audience for *Dune*.[4]

This article explores why a 1960s science-fiction (sf) novel from the U.S. resonated with a young Québécois in the 1980s and analyzes how Villeneuve's career trajectory and film style led to his financially and critically successful adaptation. Combining the blockbuster techniques of space opera with his signature arthouse approach, the auteur's *Dune* reflects concerns both global in scope and intimately tied to his Québécois identity.[5]

Like his peers in what would be called Québec's "nouvelle génération" of filmmakers in the early 2000s,[6] Villeneuve grapples with the burden of national history and debates over sovereignty rooted in discourses of decolonization. Admitting "his own fascination with generational memory,"[7] Villeneuve's films nonetheless consistently seek a way out of inherited provincialism, looking beyond Québec's borders—not only to other regions on Earth, but to outer space and the distant future. Though criticized for being too interested in the image and not engaged enough with political questions of interest to previous generations of filmmakers,[8] Villeneuve's body of work cannot escape being read through the lens of national identity. His positionality as white and male, but also Québécois—belonging to North America's francophone minority—is key to a complete understanding of his art. Although his move to Hollywood afforded him some distance from local preoccupations,[9] Villeneuve's oeuvre, including *Dune: Part One* (2021) and *Part Two* (2024), resonates with the timeworn questions of colonial oppression and the right to self-determination, along with the expectations previous generations place on a nation's youth. As Ismaël Houdassine asserts, *Dune* deals with "des questions chères à Villeneuve," survival and renaissance,[10] but also contact with the Other, fundamental to postcolonial criticism.

Science-fiction Film, Québec, and Villeneuve

In a recent special issue of *24 images* devoted to science fiction in film, Alexandre Fontaine Rousseau refers to Villeneuve as a "cinéaste 'visionnaire' par excellence de la science-fiction contemporaine."[11] A brief survey of Villeneuve's career reveals how this French-speaking Canadian rose to Hollywood's A-list and, more particularly, as a director of science-fiction films, a genre not typically associated with Québec, despite some notable exceptions, such as Stéphane Lafleur's *Viking* (2022).[12] A cinematic form that "we recognize when we see it," scholars insist on the difficulty of defining sf film.[13] Apart from identifying its distinctive iconography (spaceships, aliens, distant planets, and future cities or wastelands), and unique cinematic techniques (a range of special effects used to render its speculative subject matter visible), critics struggle to frame it succinctly. Part of this problem carries over from scholarly debates about science-fiction literature, but it also derives from the notion that there are two distinct strains of sf film, blockbuster and arthouse, each of which reflects an opposing ideological viewpoint. Villeneuve's particular mastery results from blending these two strains to realize works, like *Arrival* (2016) and *Dune* (2021 and 2024), both of which are commercial and critical successes.[14]

Epic space opera, also referred to as "blockbuster sf,"[15] epitomized by George Lucas's *Star Wars* franchise (1977–present), unambiguously celebrates space colonization, even as it pits the Force's freedom fighters against the evil Empire and Republic. Good and bad exist within an unquestioned ideology of colonial expansion. Popular films with exciting action and colorful heroes and villains, blockbuster space operas rely on spectacle and special effects to stage recurring iterations of the eternal struggle between good and evil. In contrast, intellectual "arthouse" science-fiction films focus more on ideas and the artistic composition of images,[16] epitomized by Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), a film that Villeneuve pays homage to with *Dune*.[17] More recent arthouse sf includes *Under the Skin* (Jonathan Glazer, 2013) or *High Life* (Claire Denis, 2018), and even Denis's brother Martin Villeneuve's *Mars & Avril* (2012). Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982) is frequently cited as an arthouse classic, but it also contains aspects of blockbuster sf, offering both an artistic film style and a thought experiment about the nature of humanity. Just two years after *Blade Runner*'s release, auteur filmmaker David Lynch released a "failed" adaptation of Herbert's

Dune (1984),[18] films Villeneuve would surely have seen in his youth. It is no mere coincidence that Villeneuve was tapped to direct the reboot *Blade Runner 2049* (2017) and was signed soon after its release to direct a new adaptation of *Dune* (2021).

Already as a young filmmaker in Québec, Villeneuve explored science-fictional and fantastic tropes, and his early films consistently look beyond Québec's borders and eventually into outer space or the distant future.[19] His rise began with a victory in the 1990–1991 season of the film-making contest and reality television show, *La course destination monde*, in which contestants travelled the world making short films. Villeneuve's experiences that year gave him valuable insight about oppressed peoples living in former colonies, such as Thailand and India, or in non-Western former empires engaged in their own colonial enterprises, such as China and Russia. As part of the prize package for winning the *Course destination monde*, Villeneuve was allowed to work with Pierre Perrault on a documentary short called *Cornouailles*, which tells the story of "musk oxen defending their tundra territories." As Villeneuve admits, however, it's also "about French Canadians and America,"[20] revealing his allegorical sensibility. Another key step in his career was his segment *Le Technétium* in the acclaimed omnibus *Cosmos* (1996), which contains science-fictional tropes, including the rare element of its title and its mise-en-scène of a near-future television talk show reminiscent of *Max Headroom* (1987–1988). His earliest fiction feature, *Un 32 août sur terre* (1998), plays with space and time in a speculative manner, as its impossibly dated title suggests, and his breakout success, *Maelström* (2000), flirts with synchronicity, the fairy tale, and magical realism. [21] At this time, visual science-fiction narratives by Québécois entered the realm of possibility with the popular *Star Trek* parody series, *Dans une galaxie près de chez vous* (1999–2001).

One of Villeneuve's first English-language films, *Enemy* (2013), deals with the fantastic trope of the doppelganger. In Hollywood, after cutting his teeth on the thriller, *Prisoners* (2013), Villeneuve took on an explicitly sf project with *Arrival.*[22] Eric Heisserer's screenplay, based on a scientifically rigorous short story by Ted Chiang, allows Villeneuve an initial opportunity to merge the two strains of sf film. *Arrival* depicts one of sf's oldest space opera tropes, staging Earthlings' reactions to an alien first contact. Yet it also explores in a sophisticated manner language's role in shaping

identity, culture, as well as notions of time and reality. Given that language has been viewed as "the instrument of empire,"[23] and francophones' preoccupation with the survival of French in North America, *Arrival* engaged the Québécois director more fundamentally than it might an anglophone Hollywood insider. Indeed, the film's success with intellectuals derives partly from Villeneuve's sensitivity to its source text's engagement with linguistics. As anthropologist David Sutton writes, "For a mainstream Hollywood film, *Arrival* distinguishes itself in pushing back against [the] facile image of language transparency" prevalent in mainstream sf film and television.[24] Indeed, Francesco Sticchi argues that *Arrival* "presents an ethical and linguistic challenge based on the viewers' capacity to reframe their own ways of perceiving the world."[25] Language also plays an important role in *Dune*, as Paul and his mother Jessica deploy a hegemonic "Voice," which allows them to manipulate others,[26] but their ability to speak Fremen is essential to their acceptance into the desert Seitch.

A key to understanding Villeneuve's filmmaking lies in the fact that, despite his privileged status as a middle-class white male, he also identifies with a minority position—as a francophone in North America and as a "French Canadian" in Hollywood. This unique positionality informs his reading of *Dune* through the lens of postcolonial critiques of imperialism and contributes to the success of his adaptation where others have faltered. [27]

"Arthouse space opera": Villeneuve's Adaptation of *Dune*

Critics refer to "the novel's history as a graveyard of cinematic hopes,"[28] but they also acknowledge Villeneuve's success in adapting a text that had been described as "cursed."[29] In addition to his unique positionality in relation to the novel's colonial critiques, the filmmaker brings a deep understanding of sf film and literature, its techniques and tropes, which contributed to his success where, for example, the acclaimed American auteur David Lynch is widely seen to have failed. Villeneuve mobilizes this genre fluency by adapting Herbert's iconic novel[30] as an "arthouse space opera."

Dune (1965) has been referred to as "[a] seminal work in the space opera genre" because it explores "themes of politics, religion, and ecology within a vast, complex universe."[31] Ismaël Houdassine identifies Villeneuve's *Dune: Part One* (2021) as a "[v]éritable *space opera*."[32] In the introduction to *The Space Opera Renaissance*, esteemed editor David G. Hartwell defines the

sub-genre as changing precisely when films like Scott's *Blade Runner* and Lynch's *Dune* were released in the 1980s:

> Henceforth, "space opera" meant, and still generally means, colorful, dramatic, large-scale science fiction adventure, competently and sometimes beautifully written, usually focused on a sympathetic, heroic central character and plot action […] and usually set in the relatively distant future and in space or on other worlds, characteristically optimistic in tone. It often deals with war, piracy, military virtues, and very large-scale action, large stakes.[33]

Mark Bould adds two more pertinent elements to this definition: "contemporary blockbuster SF typically privileges spectacle and affect."[34]

How Villeneuve's adaptation reflects these criteria may appear self-evident to viewers of *Dune*. Its screenplays, co-written by Villeneuve, with Jon Spaihts and Eric Roth for *Part One* and with Spaihts alone for *Part Two*, draw on the primary material provided by Herbert: a story of war and military virtue with galactic-level stakes set on the distant planet of Arrakis in the year 10,191. They feature colorful dramatic action on a grand scale, focused on the coming-of-age adventure of a sympathetic, heroic central character, Paul Atreides. Although critics are less unified on this aspect of the films, fans would argue that they are more than competently written, and their imagery certainly conveys the beauty of Herbert's source text.[35] Similarly, although some critics found the films lacking in affect, others acknowledge an emotional investment in the characters and in the epic drama in which they are involved:[36] "Villeneuve nous investit totalement comme spectateur."[37]

As Houdassine remarks, *Dune* offers "une expérience grandiose bien au-dessus des superproductions du moment."[38] Villeneuve's spectacular film style lends itself to images of "grand scale and scope," typical of blockbuster space opera. Already present in *Un 32 août sur terre,* and later in *Incendies* (2010) and *Sicario* (2015), his frequently noted fascination with desertscapes recurs in *Dune*, as cinematographer Greig Fraser echoes the work of André Turpin and Roger Deakins on Villeneuve's earlier desert-set films. One of the film's major challenges was to achieve the level of world-building found in Herbert's novel;[39] Villeneuve accomplishes this through location shooting in the epic real-world desertscapes of Jordan and Abu Dhabi. Another essential element of the sf film, special effects enabled the insertion—often

via sophisticated CGI—of monumental colonial architecture designed by Villeneuve's frequent collaborator, Pierre Vermette. Similarly, the advanced technologies and future societies typical of space operas are conveyed with a stylish combination of SFX and set design, including the "thopter," dragonfly-like helicopters, the huge spice harvesters, and Baron Harkonnen's anti-gravitational implants.

In addition to the film's epic visual scale, a more screenwriting-specific challenge lay in adapting *Dune*'s intricate plot of court intrigues and colonial military conflict in a manner intelligible to viewers unfamiliar with its source text, while also satisfying its fans. Villeneuve tackled this problem by negotiating a contract to tell the story over the course of two films, but he and his collaborators also cleverly relate Herbert's narrative in an episodic fashion. Told like a series of vignettes structured around "recognition moments" for viewers familiar with Herbert's novel, the screenwriters focus attention on key dramatic events. These include, for example, the "gom jabbar," Paul's test of self-control carried out by the Bene Gesserit Reverend Mother Mohiam (Charlotte Rampling)[40] with the box of pain, and Paul's famous duels, first with the Fremen Jamis (Babs Olusanmokum) and in *Part Two* with Harkonnen heir Feyd-Rautha (Austin Butler), as well as his iconic first worm ride. They simplify certain plot complications, including a sub-plot in which Leto's men were led to believe he had been betrayed by Jessica. The film adaptation elides this potentially misogynistic episode that might cast doubt upon her character, her love for her husband, and her drive to save her son's life. Although occasionally inserting the requisite sf "info-dump," passages which explain the estranged principles of the imaginary universe depicted in the sf novel or film, they avoid overcomplicating the narrative with explanations of corollary systems, such as the Mentats.

Following the tenets of good space opera, the narrative remains character-driven, focused particularly on a sympathetic, heroic central character, Paul Atreides, and, secondarily, on his mother Jessica in *Part One* and on his lover Chani in *Part Two*. Villeneuve is notably reliant on the close-up in his cinematic style,[41] drawing the viewer into the emotional struggles of his protagonists and antagonists. Furthermore, his casting Timothée Chalamet as the film's hero demonstrates a considered strategy: an actor who is both French and American, and who—despite his apparent frailty—has already established credibility as a warrior, portraying Henry V in *The King* (David

Michôd, 2019).[42] Few A-list actors could so successfully embody *Dune*'s hero as described by Herbert: "Paul would appear to be the underdog — a 'stringy whipcord of a youth…with ribs there to count.'"[43] Chalamet's slender form faithfully reflects the source text, but especially builds viewer sympathy when he is pitted against, for example, the "heavy shoulders" and "thick muscles" of Feyd-Rautha. In addition, Villeneuve's twenty-first-century adaptation focuses particularly on the characters of Jessica and Chani, both of whom are portrayed as strong warriors in keeping with contemporary values of gender equity.[44] In addition to experiencing Paul's emotional states externally, through close-ups and his interactions with other characters and situations, viewers also experience his inner life through carefully constructed dream sequences, another hallmark of Villeneuve's magical realist style. The mythico-religious aspects of Herbert's novel appear in sequences in which Paul sees possible futures or communicates with his sister, who is still in his mother's womb. While on the one hand, Villeneuve builds a plausibly constructed physical world of epic proportions through the techniques of space opera, his mastery of the mystical, dream-like character of Herbert's novel reflects aspects of arthouse sf.

In his study of American sf film, Bradley Schauer argues that "major SF films employ strategies of legitimation meant to differentiate them from exploitation cinema and render them accessible and socially acceptable for consumption by mainstream audiences."[45] Schauer enumerates these strategies, which vary in prominence by period, as including:

> an emphasis on scientific accuracy, the use of art cinema style and narration, political content, spectacular special effects, greater psychological complexity and nuanced characterization, the involvement of major stars, the guidance of an auteur director, the avoidance of camp, and fantasy world-building through production design.[46]

Warner Bros., which distributed *Dune*, and Legendary Pictures, its production company, counted on a number of these legitimizing strategies to ensure the success of a major investment. Several of these strategies are also characteristic of arthouse sf, most notably the use of art cinema style and narration and the guidance of an auteur director. Similarly, both "an emphasis on scientific accuracy" and "political content" reflect aspects of arthouse

sf. Others, such as "spectacular special effects," "the involvement of major stars," and "fantasy world-building" reflect characteristics of blockbuster sf discussed above. Also associated with arthouse sf is the notion that such films will explore ideas in a way that is more sophisticated and nuanced than space opera's often binary approach to battles of good versus evil or human versus alien. Finally, arthouse sf's ideology tends to question social institutions, values, and power structures in a way that space opera film generally does not.

The most visible strategy of legitimation associated with the arthouse sf dimensions of *Dune* lies in the studio's recruitment of "Denis Villeneuve." A director with an auteur persona, who first rose to prominence with a series of independent art films released abroad, Villeneuve's name carries artistic clout. This strategy proved effective for *Arrival*, which was nominated for several Academy Awards, including Best Picture. Furthermore, Villeneuve's Québécois identity, more often referred to as "French-Canadian" in the American press,[47] arguably contributes to a certain cachet. Related by association to the canon of French (from France) auteur cinema, this facile linguistic and cultural connection (he speaks French so he must be [like the] French), stands up upon further consideration. French Nouvelle Vague filmmakers of the 1960s influenced Québécois film, including those of Villeneuve's generation. Jean-Luc Godard and François Truffaut produced iconic arthouse sf films with *Alphaville* (1965) and *Fahrenheit 451* (1966) respectively, the latter adapted—like *Dune*—from a classic American sf novel by Ray Bradbury. Further associations can be made between Québec's *nouvelle génération,* and Villeneuve in particular, to the French *cinéma du look* of the 1980s. The striking color palette and neo-noir aesthetics of Jean-Jacques Beineix's *Diva* (1981), for instance, possibly influenced Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982). Luc Besson, also associated with the "look" movement, produced stylish sf films beginning with the iconic *La femme Nikita* (1990),[48] *The Fifth Element* (1997), and *Lucy* (2014).

The connection between Denis Villeneuve and metropolitan French arthouse directors is further validated by Villeneuve's own use of art cinema style and narration. Various aspects of this arthouse sf style contribute to favorable critical reception and, by extension, to the artistic success of *Dune*. In addition to the dream sequences and visualizations of Paul's spiritual experiences, such as his drinking of the Water of Life, an intense distillation of the drug spice, in *Part Two*, Villeneuve also deploys an array of artistic

techniques in his filmmaking. Color is essential, with changes in color palette suggesting various associations throughout his oeuvre. In *Dune*, we see this at work in the sequence in which Paul and Jessica shelter from a sandstorm after escaping from Harkonnen troops. Inside the tent's filtered light, they are bathed in a womb-like shade of red, whereas after the storm subsides, they emerge into the natural light of the desert with its range of tans and browns. The play in lighting artistically underscores the metaphor of Paul's and Jessica's rebirth into a new existence in the desert. Villeneuve's narrative technique, referred to here as episodic, has also been referred to as elliptic, leaving aspects unsaid or open to interpretation. In *Dune,* it is also non-chronological, given the constant flashes forward to the future in Paul's visions, reflective of an arthouse approach to storytelling.

To a certain extent, *Dune* adopts the legitimizing strategy of attention to scientific accuracy through its central theme of the environment, as others have analyzed in relation to Herbert's novel.[49] But above all, as an arthouse sf film, *Dune* wants to make viewers think and expresses an oppositional political statement. As I argue elsewhere about Québec's sf literature,[50] *Dune* reflects on politics and identity through its critique of colonialism. Raised on the discourse of decolonization in a society that positions itself as a minority within Canada and North America,[51] the Québécois director handles *Dune* in a more intellectually sophisticated manner than might have a James Cameron, a Christopher Nolan, or a Michael Bay. Despite the complex and often fraught relationship between Québec and its Indigenous peoples,[52] and also related to Québec's double colonization (first by the French and then by the English), Villeneuve builds viewer identification with the Fremen, the figurative Indigenous peoples of the colonized planet Arrakis.[53] In doing so, he reframes Herbert's story more clearly through the eyes of the colonized rather than of the colonizer.

Whereas Herbert's *Dune* opens with the voice of the colonizer, an epigraphical citation from Princess Irulan's *Manual of Muad'Dib*,[54] Villeneuve's *Part One* opens and closes with the words of Paul's future lover, Chani. She introduces the planet and her people's struggle in voiceover: "The planet of Arrakis is so beautiful when the sun is low. Moving over the sands you can see the spice in the air." The peaceful image of the desertscape is rudely invaded with that of huge, fire-breathing machines, the spice harvesters, as she continues: "They ravage our lands. Their cruelty to my people is all

I've known." Villeneuve thus gives primacy to the Indigenous voice in his tale of colonial critique, immediately introducing the cruelty of Harkonnen exploitation. Although the Fremen appear in *Part One* largely only in Paul's dreams, allowing them to be an abstract problem in relation to the very real Harkonnen threat, they become central characters in *Part Two*. That said, the first film closes on two key assertions made on-screen by Fremen characters; announcing the coming sequel, Chani asserts: "This is only the beginning." But Paul is also informed that: "You're one of us now." While Paul's assimilation into Fremen culture raises concerns of appropriation, the Indigenous voice nonetheless clearly frames Villeneuve's retelling in a manner that is absent from Herbert's novel.

Chani's acceptance of Paul Atreides into the Fremen clan reflects the hero's ability to adapt to a new environment, evocative of the French-Canadian *coureur des bois* who often assimilated into an Indigenous lifestyle.[55] Indeed, when unexpectedly reunited with Paul, Duncan jokes of his appearance: "My God, man, you've gone native!" In between its epic sequences of colonial power struggles, *Dune*'s narrative trajectory follows its hero's *prise-de-conscience*, his epiphany about the injustice of outsiders' oppression of Indigenous peoples. As he adopts the Fremen fight as his own, Paul undergoes a change of identity, taking the name *Muad'Dib*, ostensibly derived from the desert mouse, but actually "meaning 'educator, teacher and discipliner.'"[56] Of course, this trope also perpetuates, as did James Cameron's *Avatar* (2009), a narrative in which the white hero "saves" the Indigenous people from his own kind.[57] Despite its recycling of the "white" hero motif (a notion discussed below), Villeneuve's *Dune* contrasts with earlier visual adaptations of Herbert's novel which featured predominantly white casts.[58] Furthermore, the Québécois director depicts *Dune*'s villains clearly; the "hyperwhite" Harkonnen position the Atreides dynasty in a sort of racial and ethical middle ground between the Indigenous Fremen and the unapologetically imperialistic Harkonnen.

Significantly, the Fremen's struggle in *Part Two* is not waged against the Atreides whose command of the planet is a short-lived glitch but against a colonial power painted as unabashedly villainous in both Herbert's novel and Villeneuve's films. In contrast with the Fremen who live in harmony with their planet's now scant resources, the Harkonnen dwell in an entirely artificial construct of monumental proportions, practicing a wasteful form

of conspicuous consumption of resources acquired through the plunder of Arrakis and other colonized planets. With the Fremen depicted, as they were in Herbert's novel, as a desert people of color reminiscent of planet Earth's Bedouin or Touareg, the Harkonnen in Villeneuve's film reflect a recent development in science-fiction and horror film narratives: the construction of monstrous hyperwhites. In 2008, Gretchen Bakke observed an increasing number of black heroes in action horror films, in which the monstrous Others are portrayed as "hyperwhites—that is whites over-endowed with traditionally white characteristics (cultural as well as racial)," citing such franchises as *Blade* (Stephen Norrington, 1998), which pits Wesley Snipes's character against predatory white vampires.[59] Casting the Swedish Stellan Skarsgård as Baron Vladimir Harkonnen, adorned with a fat suit to underscore his insatiable appetite as a figure for his lust for power, *Dune* invokes the violent hegemony of the Vikings. Similarly, Paul's mother Jessica—eventually revealed to be the Baron's daughter—is played by Swedish actress, Rebecca Ferguson. His sadistic, oafish nephew Glossu Rabben Harkonnen is played by Dave Bautista, who played the role of Drax the Destroyer in the *Guardians of the Galaxy* franchise (James Gunn, 2014, 2017, and 2023), in white face make-up.[60] The highly intelligent psychopath, Feyd-Rautha, played by Austin Butler, embodies an intensified form of racist imperialist violence, with his gladiatorial battles occurring in a monumental stadium designed to evoke the pageantry associated with Leni Riefenstahl's depictions of the Third Reich. As in the Nazi project, the Harkonnen agenda is genocide, as the Baron gives the directive: "Kill them all." To further enhance the hyperwhite appearance of his character, Butler had to spend three hours in the make-up chair to structure his bald head and prominent eyebrow ridges,[61] an effect that made him resemble the zombie-like "darkseekers" in the Will Smith vehicle, *I Am Legend* (Francis Lawrence, 2007).[62] The Harkonnen's monstrosity appears repeatedly in vivid imagery, for example, as the grossly obese baron rises out of his tar-like healing vat, or as Feyd-Rautha kills for sexual pleasure, but also as Gurney Halleck tells Paul: "They're not human. They're brutal."

Whereas *Part Two* focuses largely on the Fremen struggle for freedom from Harkonnen oppression, *Part One* proposes that in contrast with their racist, wealth-driven, even sadistic rule, there may be a kinder, gentler, and possibly more just form of colonial rule embodied by Duke Leto Atreides. As Leto prepares to leave Caladan for his new post as governor of Arrakis, he

rallies his troops in a manner that invokes the rhetoric of the United States Marines when called to intervene abroad: "We are House Atreides. There is no call we will not answer. There is no faith we will betray. The emperor asks that we bring peace to Arrakis. House Atreides accepts." Leto sees his mission as one of peacekeeping. Again, through casting and characterization, Paul's heroic mentors, Duncan Idaho and Gurney Halleck (Josh Brolin),[63] suggest that House Atreides recruits loyal, honest, and ethical individuals who respect human life even as they must take it, and Leto and Paul inspire such loyalty that their men are willing to sacrifice their lives to protect them. By casting multiracial Jason Momoa, whose roles include Indigenous characters in *Red Road* (2014–2015) and *Frontier* (2016–2018), Villeneuve also suggests that House Atreides embraces diversity. This image is further supported by casting Stephen McKinley Henderson as Paul's Mentat teacher, Thufir Hawat. Indeed, Oscar Isaac, cast as Duke Leto Atreides, was born Óscar Isaac Hernández Estrada in Guatemala, and his dark-haired, olive-skinned phenotype further distances House Atreides from the hyperwhite Harkonnen. This and other elements may even suggest that Villeneuve's Atreides are of Hispanic origin, linking them to a "Latin" minority, a group with which French-Canadians once identified as Catholics who spoke a Latin-derived language. Not only does Villeneuve retain the motif of Paul's grandfather's bull-fighting adventures, thereby linking the family to cultural practices associated with Spain and Mexico but, if this connection is extended a little further, it also suggests an affinity between the Atreides and the "Arab"-like Fremen. This association gains additional resonance since Spain's history and culture were shaped by centuries of Islamic rule under the Muslim Umayyad Caliphate during the Middle Ages. If this link seems far-fetched, R. Ali documents Herbert's knowledge of this history, including having Paul name his teacher Gurney Halleck "Gurney the Valorous" after a quote "written in Arabic above the portals of the University of Granada, established during Islamic Spain."[64]

Despite its ethnic diversity and its ostensible alignment with values associated with the "good," House Atreides remains complicit with the power politics and colonial exploitation of the Imperium. That said, the Harkonnen victory over House Atreides, achieved with the help of the Emperor's elite Sardaukar troops, reveals that the good-hearted cannot effectively compete in the game of power politics. Despite the temptation to read a national allegory,

in which Villeneuve links the Atreides to the slightly more positive image of the French in New France and the Harkonnen with the more oppressive British Red Coats in Canadian history,[65] his *Dune* ultimately foregrounds the systemic failure and moral bankruptcy of all colonial regimes. *Part One* opens precisely with the notion that *all* colonial rulers are oppressors, as Chani's voice-off concludes: "Our warriors couldn't free Arrakis from the Harkonnen, but one day, by imperial decree, they were gone. Why did the emperor choose this path? And who will our next oppressors be?" Although to a lesser extent than in Herbert's *Dune*, the Atreides are also oppressors who must be overthrown.[66]

Herbert's *Dune* may also have resonated with a young Denis Villeneuve because of its exploration of religion's role in colonial oppression, given the key roles attributed to Jesuit and Recollet missionaries, the so-called *robes noires et bures grises*, in Québec's historiography. In addition to panegyrics for the Canadian Martyrs, missionaries who fell victim to the Iroquois, Québec's founding mothers, religious women like Marie de l'Incarnation and the Ursuline sisters, have become *lieux de mémoire* in Pierre Nora's sense of the term.[67] Certainly, the two *Dune* films can be watched purely for entertainment, as a space opera action adventure pitting the "good" Atreides and Fremen against the "bad" Harkonnen. They also present, however, engaged viewers with a complex approach to structures of power, in their more nuanced critique of colonialism, coupled with an accusation of religion's abuse as an "opiate of the masses," through Paul's exploitation by the Bene Gesserit. Villeneuve follows Herbert's lead in the critique of organized religion, revealing that the so-called prophecy of the Lisan al-Gaib was manufactured and planted by the Bene Gesserit, an order of religious women seeking to manipulate the Emperor (Christopher Walken) from behind the scenes.[68] Organized religion's complicity with power structures takes form through the characterization of the Reverend Mother Mohiam, one of whose main functions is that of procuress, as she plants Bene Gesserit initiates into key roles as concubines to galactic leaders, including Paul's mother Jessica. Just as the Harkonnen are linked to Hitler's Third Reich through their whiteness and imperial pageantry, so too are the Bene Gesserit with their eugenic program: selective breeding to produce individuals with enhanced psychic powers.[69] Although Paul was considered a "mistake" because he is male, both he and his sister Alia are products of the program. Still in their mother's

womb through most of *Part Two*, a vision reveals that Anya Taylor-Joy will portray Alia in the franchise's third instalment, *Dune Messiah*, slated for a Christmas 2026 release, in keeping with the studio's space opera blockbuster aspirations for the film.

Related to the issue of race and skin color, bloodlines and genealogy is another theme explored in Herbert's *Dune* that may have resonated with a younger Villeneuve. The hyperwhite Harkonnen would like to annihilate not just the Fremen, but also Leto's bloodline, as the Baron hopefully tells his rival, believing that Paul and Jessica have perished in the desert: "Your bloodline ends forever!" The struggle for "racial" survival, referred to by French-Canadian intellectuals as *la survivance*, underlies late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Franco-nationalist discourse,[70] and fears of extinction haunt Québec's sf literature.[71] A sense of its essential difference from the rest of Canada subtends Franco-Québécois identity, a difference expressed as both a blessing and a curse. On the one hand, it offers a clear source of distinction from other North Americans, most particularly those from the United States, a distinction often seen as unavailable to Anglo-Canadians. On the other, of course, this difference can be framed as a disadvantage, even a source of discrimination. Paul Atreides's genealogy also makes him unique, even monstrous. As he increasingly experiences dreams and visions, and Jessica eventually tells him of his shared Harkonnen-Atreides origins, he rebels: "You did this to me! You Bene Gesserit made me a freak!" One can imagine how Herbert's fictional hero might doubly resonate with the teenaged Villeneuve invoked in the introduction to this article: yes, many adolescents feel like misfits, but as French speakers in North America, all young Québécois are "different" from the majority culture of Canada and the U.S.

Despite its oppositional discourse on colonialism, however, Villeneuve's film, as Frank Jacob has argued about its source novel,[72] reinscribes various Orientalist tropes that position the West in opposition to the East.[73] Jacob specifically links Herbert's characterization of Paul to T. E. Lawrence,[74] the historical figure depicted in *Lawrence of Arabia* (David Lean, 1962), another film to which Villeneuve openly pays homage.[75] Herbert's description of the Fremen and their desert planet recalls past and prefigures developing conflicts in the Middle East and Western intervention in these,[76] from the construction of Israel by treaty, to French involvement in Lebanon and the Lebanese Civil War (a context Villeneuve engages in his adaptation of Wajdi

Mouawad's *Incendies*[77]), to the energy crises of the 1970s. In the twenty-first century, which for some began on September 11, 2001, a whole new array of conflicts related to the Muslim world appear, generating additional layers of resonance for the contemporary adaptation of *Dune*. Whereas Villeneuve's *Dune* admittedly invokes "Orientalist" tropes, it does not simply play into dominant anti-"Arab" discourses; rather, it elicits sympathy for the pseudo-Arab Fremen and ultimately blurs the lines between East and West.

In addition to the images of the desert expanse immediately identified with the geography of the Arab world (North Africa and the Middle East), the Fremen—referred to in the novel as "the people of Misr," which means Egypt in Arabic[78]—first appear on screen in *Part One* as a nameless crowd of extras, women clad in burka-like dress. They frequently act as religious fanatics, and are naive, easily manipulated by the Bene Gesserit stories of a messiah: "they see what they've been told to see." Even Fremen individuals are initially introduced in subaltern roles, as exemplified by Shadout Mapes (Golda Rosheuvel), Jessica's new housekeeper who presents her with the "crysknife," a mystical dagger modeled upon an Eastern weapon, the Javanese kris. Moreover, as Jacob observes, Villeneuve's representation of Chani used in publicity materials for the film echoes the famous 1985 *National Geographic* image of Sharbat Gula, the famed "Afghan Girl," by Steve McCurry.[79] The relationship between the imagined Fremen and real-world "Orientals"[80] is further underscored by Hans Zimmer's magnificent soundtrack. A musical motif evoking Eastern soundscapes accompanies Dr. Liet Kines's (Sharon Duncan-Brewster) guided tour of the spice fields for the new arrivals. Despite this reinscription of these Orientalist tropes, however, Villeneuve's overarching political framing cultivates viewer sympathy for, and identification with, the Indigenous Fremen, in a manner consistent with key aspects of Herbert's source text. Furthermore, Villeneuve blurs the lines between East and West, avoiding the dichotomous approach of space opera in favor of arthouse sophistication, when he depicts the Emperor's Sardaukar army—a horde of almost mindless, programmed warriors akin to the clones in *Star Wars*—as an indoctrinated flock of jihadists. Indeed, the pseudo-medieval power structures inherent to Herbert's imagined future result from a historic "Butlerian Jihad," a holy war against artificial intelligence, and scholars have also likened the Imperium to Byzantium,[81] further blurring the lines between East and West.

Eventually, however, Fremen characters are individualized and become central figures in *Part Two*, and Fremen roles are cast with actors of African, Hispanic, and Semitic descent and reveal a range of skin colors from the olive of the Spaniard Javier Bardem (as Stilgar), to the biracial Zendaya (as Chani), to the ebony skin of Sharon Duncan-Brewster, in the role of Kines, a Fremen Métis.[82] Edwardo Pérez analyzes this significant divergence between Villeneuve's adaptation and earlier screen versions of Herbert's novel, which largely featured predominantly white casts, concluding that, as both a person of color and a person who cultivates a gender-fluid public persona, "Zendaya's unique intersectionality is perhaps what sets her most apart from previous actresses to portray Chani."[83] Pérez takes a different angle than I do, but the title of his article, "What Do Zendaya's Blue Eyes Really Mean?" raises an important question. As the biracial Zendaya moves from the periphery of *Part One*—appearing largely in Paul's visions and then briefly at the film's conclusion—to the forefront in *Part Two*, the significance of her blue eyes shifts. In the novel's mythos, all desert Fremen have blue eyes due to their constant exposure to spice; however, when depicted with a non-white face, these blue eyes also have a metaphorical and cultural value for real-world viewers. Until the very conclusion of *Part One*, Chani merely haunts Paul's dreams, possibly figuring how a history of slavery and "miscegenation" haunts not just American culture as proposed, for example, in Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* (1987), but Western society as a whole because of the history of colonialism. When Paul meets Chani, and she plays a central role in *Part Two*, he must face this past and, by falling in love with the Other, literally embrace her. To an extent, I agree with Pérez's conclusion that: "in casting actors of color as Fremen and Paul as a white savior, Villeneuve […] only reinforces the value of whiteness by failing to envision a better future for people of color."[84] But, depending on how things play out in Villeneuve's adaptation of *Dune: Messiah*, we may see that the imagined future is one of cultural and biological fusion, when Paul and Chani have a child together in Herbert's second novel.

Unfortunately, as both Herbert's novel and Villeneuve's film suggest at their conclusions—when Paul becomes engaged to Princess Irulan (Florence Pugh), the Emporor's daughter and a Bene Gesserit initiate like Jessica—colonial power structures prevail, merely changing hands rather than being dismantled. Although Paul places the Fremen Stilgar in charge of Arrakis, he

still allows the Imperium to persist; he believes that he can install a more just and equitable rule, but Herbert's subsequent novels reveal that power corrupts all who wield it. Already at the end of *Part Two*, Paul's betrayal of Chani establishes a metonymy for his ultimate betrayal of the Fremen, whom he has (at first unconsciously) manipulated by accepting the invented role of the Kwisatz Haderach and used their battle for freedom as his own steppingstone to the Imperial throne. We must therefore nuance the significance of *Dune*'s conclusion in both Herbert's novel and Villeneuve's adaptation: its aim is not to depict a utopian future of liberation from the systems of power for humanity as a whole—as Pérez seems to suggest they should—but rather to stage, through allegory, a condemnation of the moral bankruptcy of the colonial-imperialist project and to question the figure of the hero-savior itself.

Conclusion

In *Reverse Colonization: Science Fiction, Imperial Fantasy, and Alt-Victimhood*, David M. Higgins warns of the political implications and ambiguous readings to which colonial fantasies in sf can lend themselves. Although his primary corpus involves sf novels from the 1960s, including Frank Herbert's *Dune*, Higgins sees a resurgence of similar fantasies in twenty-first-century sf films. His primary goal is to reveal how stories of colonial victimhood and liberation of the oppressed, like that told in *Dune*, can be reversed—particularly through the insertion of a white hero like Paul Atreides or *Avatar*'s Jake Sully—to reflect an ideological agenda associated with white, male privilege. Higgins concludes that in Herbert's *Dune*:

> rather than attempting to liberate Arrakis from the imperial system, Paul uses the planet's power (its natural resources and military potential) to gain control of the empire from within. Rather than dismantling the Imperium, the novel posits the redemption of empire through the enlightened guidance of a male superman who has successfully decolonized his own consciousness from restrictive limitations.[85]

Subsequent novels in the series, beginning with *Dune Messiah* (1969), further critique the hero as complicit with a system he initially set out to dismantle. As Tim O'Reilly, introducing Herbert's essay "Dangers of the Superhero," writes, "Many readers of the *Dune* series have complained that Paul

Atreides, the hero of the first novel, is tarnished in the second, and by the third, is made to seem an intellectual failure."[86] Does the popular success of Villeneuve's adaptations similarly reside in viewers' simplistic reception of it as a space opera, in which Paul and the Fremen conquer the evil Harkonnen? Anecdotally, as I watched *Part Two* in a movie theater in the university city of East Lansing, Michigan, I overheard one of a group of young men exclaim at the end: "That's the best movie ever made!" I had to wonder, however, if these mostly white, obviously anglophone males had simply been seduced by the space opera, failing to understand the film's arthouse, oppositional message about colonialism and its problematization of heroism.

Dune: Part One and *Dune: Part Two* make strides toward acknowledging the moral bankruptcy of colonial imperialism, and they envision a diverse future for humanity, despite occasional ideological inconsistencies. Although Villeneuve works from a position of privilege—as a white male working in Hollywood, the heart of American cultural imperialism—his distinct positionality as Québécois informs his adaptation of Herbert's novel in ways that previous adapters could not. Undoubtedly, the social and environmental contexts for these twenty-first-century films' productions have also changed, as Edwardo Pérez admits: "Perhaps the awareness in Villeneuve's casting reflects views on representation of race and ethnicity that our society has embraced since Herbert's novel was first published in 1965 and Lynch's 1984 film was released—and even since the miniseries aired in 2000 and 2003."[87]

In any case, despite audiences' infatuation with Paul-Muad'Dib as portrayed by Timothée Chalamet, Villeneuve's conclusion to *Part Two* suggests his intention of remaining faithful to Herbert's ultimate project of warning against charismatic leaders. Paul's visions of the deaths that will result from his acceptance of the role of Kwisatz Haderach reveal a deep ambivalence about the future he has set in motion. A comparison of Herbert's *Dune* to the epic tradition of the *Iliad* observes how both texts "challenge assumptions about heroism" and even represent anti-myths as they are critical of the heroic impulse.[88] The anticipated release of Villeneuve's adaptation of *Dune: Messiah* will reveal whether he embraces this critical approach to a timeless hero. In any event, given the popularity of both *Dune* and the sequels to James Cameron's *Avatar*, we must consider Higgins's admonition that:

> identification with victimhood has become a strange source of ideological power for imperial subjects in our contemporary moment: as surprising as it may seem, imagining oneself as a colonized victim often serves the ideological core of imperial fantasy for those who benefit the most from modern-day conditions of empire.[89]

Can we attribute *Dune*'s continued popularity to the cultural paradox of "bizarro victimhood?" Or can we see it as a hopeful cultural text working "to subvert the complex, contemporary structure of dispossession that is the legacy of Franco-British settler colonialism?"[90]

Biography

Amy J. Ransom is associate professor of French at Central Michigan University. She is the author of *The Historical Imaginary: Quebec National Cinema in the Twenty-First Century* (University of Toronto Press, 2026), *I Am Legend: Race and Masculinity in an American Myth* (McFarland, 2018), *Hockey, PQ: Canada's Game in Quebec's Popular Culture* (University of Toronto Press, 2014), and *Science Fiction from Quebec: A Postcolonial Study* (McFarland, 2009). She has also published multiple book chapters and articles on cinema, television, science-fiction and fantasy from Quebec.

Notes

1. Helen Macdonald, "Desert Vision," *The New York Times Magazine* (October 2021): 60.
2. Frank Herbert, interview by Charles Platt, in *Dream Makers: The Uncommon People Who Write Science Fiction* (New York: Berkley Books, 1980), 191.
3. "Denis Villeneuve a voulu réaliser un rêve, soit celui d'adapter un livre qui a profondément marqué son adolescence" Daniel Racine, "13—*Dune*," *Séquences* no. 329 (winter 2022): 7. See also, Macdonald, "Desert Vision," 57; James Mottram, "In Conversation: Denis Villeneuve," *Sight and Sound* 31.9 (November 2021): 14.
4. Denis Villeneuve, quoted in Christian Holub, "*Dune*: Interview with Denis Villeneuve," *Entertainment Weekly* (November 2021): 49.
5. For an excellent account of Villeneuve as auteur filmmaker see Lee Carruthers, "An Equivocal Auteur: Gauging Style and Substance in the Films of Denis Villeneuve," in *Canadian Cinema in the New Millennium*, Lee Carruthers and Charles Tepperman, eds. (Montréal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2023), 42–66.
6. Yves Lever, "Cinéma québécois et mémoire," in *Le cinéma au Québec: Tradition et modernité*, Stéphane-Albert Boulais, ed. (Montreal: Fides, 2006), 87; Christian Poirier "Le cinéma québécois et la question identitaire." *Recherches sociographiques* 45.1 (2004): 33 n. 12.

7. Macdonald, "Desert Vision," 58. Generally translated as "new generation," George Melnyk perhaps invokes a reference to *Star Trek: The Next Generation* in his 2003 touchstone article, calling Villeneuve, Turpin, and others the "next generation;" George Melnyk, "Quebec's next generation: from Lauzon to Turpin," *CineAction* no. 61 (spring 2003): 10.
8. See, for example, Pierre Barrette, "Le désert à l'âme: *Un 32 août sur Terre*," *24 images* no. 93 (2000): 51; Marie-Claude Loiselle, "Au-delà des apparences: *Maelström* de Denis Villeneuve," *24 images* no. 105 (2001): 49.
9. As Heleln Macdonald reports, "he felt he had to leave;" "Desert Vision," 58.
10. Ismaël Houdassine, "L'appel du désert," *Séquences* no. 329 (2022): 20.
11. Alexandre Fontaine Rousseau, "États de la science-fiction contemporaine," *24 images* no. 202 (March 2022): 14.
12. See also Amy J. Ransom, "The Future of Quebec in Science Fiction Film and Television," *Science Fiction Film and Television* 8.1 (2015): 1–25.
13. See, for example, J. P. Telotte *Science Fiction Film* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 3–32.
14. Indeed, University of Texas's 21st Century Film Essentials series just published a single-film study of *Arrival* which supports a number of arguments made here; Roche, *Arrival* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2024).
15. Stacy Abbot, "Blockbuster SF Film," in *The Routledge Companion to Science Fiction*, Mark Bould, Andrew M. Butler, Adam Roberts, and Sherryl Vint, eds. (London and New York, NY: Routledge, 2009), 468–472.
16. Stacey Abbott, "Arthouse SF Film," in *The Routledge Companion to Science Fiction*, 463–467.
17. Kwasu D. Tembo, "Bi-lal Kaifa for the Weirding Way," *Studies in the Fantastic* no. 13 (2022): 73.
18. Critics contrast Villeneuve's "successful" adaptation with Lynch's "maligned" version; Mottram, "In conversation;" Jean-Philippe Gravel, "La carte et le territoire: *Dune*," *Ciné-Bulles* 40.1 (2022): 34; Ismaël Houdassine, "L'appel du desert," 20–21.
19. For more on Villeneuve's career, see Amy J. Ransom, "Denis Villeneuve: Québécois and Citizen of the World," and other essays in *Re-Focus: The Films of Denis Villeneuve*, Jeri English and Marie Pascal Cardinale, eds. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022). For more on science-fictional aspects of his work see Amy J. Ransom, "The Director's Cut: Denis Villeneuve Before *Blade Runner 2049*," *Science Fiction Film and Television* 13.1 (2020): 119–127.
20. Macdonald, "Desert Vision," 59.
21. See Amy J. Ransom, "Deterritorialization and the Crisis of Recognition in Turn of the Millennium Québec Film," *American Review of Canadian Studies* 43.2 (June 2013): 176–189.
22. Nancy Tartaglione, "Denis Villeneuve Talks 'Arrival,' *Deadline Hollywood* (September 2016), https://deadline.com/2016/09/arrival-movie-denis-villeneuve-interview-reactions-blade-runner-sequel-venice-film-festival-2016-1201811771/ (last accessed 8 May 2026).
23. David Damrosch, "The Semiotics of Conquest," *American Literary History* 8. 3 (1996): 516.
24. David Sutton, "*Arrival*: Anthropology in Hollywood," *Anthropology Today* 34.1 (February 2018): 8. On its foregrounding of "[t]he Sapir-Whorf linguistic relativity hypothesis [which] argues that the structure of a language affects the cognitive function and world view of its speakers," see John Engle, "Of Hopis and Heptapods: The Return of Sapir-Whorf," *ETC: A Review of General Semantics* (January 2016): 95–99.

25. Francesco Sticchi, "From Spinoza to Contemporary Linguistics: Pragmatic Ethics in Denis Villeneuve's *Arrival*," *Canadian Journal of Film Studies* 27.2 (2018): 48.
26. Frank Herbert discusses how this concept is a plausible extrapolation of how we use tone of voice and choice of words to manipulate others' reactions in everyday life; "The Sparks Have Flown," in *The Maker of Dune: Insights of a Master of Science Fiction*, Tim O'Reilly, ed. (New York, NY: Berkley Books, 1987), 107.
27. See Kara Kennedy, *Adaptations of* Dune*: Frank Herbert's Story on Screen* (Edina: Blue Key, 2024). Critics tend to attribute Villeneuve's success to the fidelity of his adaptation; Houdassine asserts: "Le film est à l'image du célèbre roman éponyme" ("L'appel du désert);" Tembo argues that it is "this very same fidelity to the text that makes the auteur's adaptation so strong" ("Bi-lal Kaifa," 72); Macdonald quotes Villeneuve as saying: "it was 'about the book, the book, *the book*" ("Desert Vision," 57).
28. Macdonald, "Desert Vision," 56.
29. Houdassine, "L'appel du desert," 20.
30. *Dune* is perhaps the best-selling sf novel ever published and one of the most translated; Kara Kennedy, *Frank Herbert's* Dune: *A Critical Companion* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022): 1–6; David M. Higgins, *Reverse Colonization: Science fiction, Imperial Fantasy, and Alt-Victimhood* (Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 2021), 31.
31. "A short guide to space opera science fiction." n.d. *First Draft Pro*, https://www.firstdraftpro.com/blog/a-short-guide-to-space-opera-science-fiction (last accessed 5 July 2024).
32. Houdassine, "L'appel du désert," 21.
33. David G. Hartwell, Introduction, *The Space Opera Renaissance*, David G. Hartwell and Kathryn Cramer, eds. (New York, NY: Tor, 2006), 17.
34. Mark Bould, "Film," *The Oxford Handbook of Science Fiction*, Rob Latham ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 2014), 158–159.
35. "*Dune* (1965) has long been acknowledged as a literary work of art;" Kennedy, *Frank Herbert's* Dune, 1.
36. Jean-Philippe Gravel's ambivalent response reflects both these reactions. His only criticism of *Part One* is that it is "trop maîtrisé" but *Part Two*, "nous garde rivés devant les paysages, les véhicules insectoïdes et les architectures qui défilent à l'écran." But Gravel also insists that it lacks in "chaleur et d'âme pour que le film ne se contente pas d'être vu, mais qu'il soit également ressenti"; "La carte et le territoire;" "Un colosse aux pieds d'argile," *Ciné-Bulles* 42.3 (2024): 42.
37. Racine, "13—*Dune*".
38. Houdassine, "L'appel du désert," 21.
39. Kennedy, *Frank Herbert's* Dune, 89–96; R. Ali, "Beside the Sand Dunes: Arab Futurism, Faith, and the Fremen of *Dune*," in *Discovering* Dune: *Essays on Frank Herbert's Epic Saga*, Dominic J. Nardi and N. Trevor Brierly, eds. (Jefferson: McFarland, 2022), 115–121.
40. Rampling had been theoretically cast as Jessica in Alejandro Jodorowsky's never materialized adaptation of *Dune*.
41. See Ransom, "The Director's Cut."
42. Indeed, Chalamet used the same fight trainer, David Kingsbury, for *Dune* and *The King*; Extra TV, "Timothée Chalamet & Austin Butler on EPIC 'Dune 2' Fight Scene (Exclusive)" (5 February, 2024), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K60X2YExZLM (last accessed 8 May 2026).

43. Tim O'Reilly, *Frank Herbert* (New York, NY: Frederick Ungar, 1981), 140, quoting Herbert, *Dune* (1965).
44. Kennedy argues that Herbert's novel also portrays empowered women; *Frank Herbert's* Dune, 77–88.
45. Bradley Schauer, *Escape Velocity: American Science Fiction Film, 1950–1982* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2017), 8.
46. Schauer, *Escape Velocity*, 8.
47. Mottram, "In conversation."
48. Which became a cult television series starring Québécois actor Roy Dupuis.
49. Kennedy, *Frank Herbert's* Dune, 35–47.
50. Amy J. Ransom, "Oppositional Postcolonialism and the Science Fiction of Québec," *Science Fiction Studies* no. 99 (July 2006): 291–312; see also Ransom, *Science Fiction from Quebec*.
51. Those unfamiliar with Québec's history might consult *Quebec Questions: Quebec Studies for the Twenty-first Century*, 2nd edition, Stéphan Gervais, Christopher Kirkey, and Jarrett Rudy, eds. (Don Mills, ON: Oxford University Press Canada, 2016).
52. Controversies over recognition, identification, and appropriation are discussed in Bruno Cornellier, *La "chose indienne": cinéma et politiques de la représentation autochtone au Québec et au Canada* (Montreal: Nota Bene, 2015); Darryl Leroux, *Distorted Descent: White Claims to Indigenous Identity* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2019).
53. The Fremen are not technically Indigenous, apparently having been settled on Arrakis, too, but they take on the status of Indigenous in relation to the Imperial off-world administrators, spice harvesters, and occupation forces. Indeed, the parallel between Fremen and the French in Québec, who settled before the English arrived, may be more appropriate. It is also worth noting that biographers and critics point out Frank Herbert's friendships with the Indigenous peoples of the Pacific Northwest where he grew up; B. Herbert, *Dreamer of Dune*, 21, 31, 54; Daniel Immerwahr,"The Quileute *Dune*: Frank Herbert, Indigeneity, and Empire," *Journal of American Studies* 56.2 (2022): 191–216.
54. Frank Herbert, *Dune* (New York: Ace, [1965] 2005): 3.
55. Filmically, one thinks of Daniel (Aden Young) in Bruce Bereford's *Black Robe* (1991).
56. R. Ali, "Beside the Sand Dunes," 104.
57. David M. Higgins effectively outlines the questionable politics of entitlement behind Hollywood's seemingly liberal sf fantasies of Indigenous empowerment in the introduction to his study *Reverse Colonization* (2021); Higgins, "Bizarro Victimhood," *Reverse Colonization*, 1–25.
58. Eduardo Pérez, "What Do Zendaya's Blue Eyes Really Mean?," in *Dune and Philosophy*, Kevin S. Decker, ed. (New York, NY: Wiley & Sons, 2022), 14–23.
59. Gretchen Bakke, "How the Black Guys Got to Kill All the White Guys and Still Be Good: An Essay on the Changing Dynamics of Race in American Action Cinema," *Social Science Research Network* (8 October 2008), http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1374994 (last accessed 8 May 2026).
60. All the Harkonnen wear some form of ultra-white make-up, but Bautista is of Greek and Filipino heritage, and prior to 9/11 wrestled briefly under a racialized stage identity as "Khan."
61. ExtraTV, "Why Austin Butler Found 3-Hour 'Dune' Transformation 'Nice' (Exclusive)" (26 February 2024), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eEdfwl6M2yY (last accessed 8 May 2026).

62. Amy J. Ransom, *I Am Legend as American Myth: Race and Masculinity in the Novel and Its Film Adaptations* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2018): 167–168
63. Brolin's casting here resonates with his role in Villeneuve's *Sicario*, a ruthless CIA agent ostensibly fighting the bad guys (drug cartels) with their own methods, a role that blurs the lines between the good and the bad. After the fall of House Atreides on Arrakis, Gurney becomes a mercenary before being reunited with Paul and Jessica to join the Fremen fight for freedom.
64. R. Ali, "Beside the Sand Dunes," 118.
65. Both English- and French-language historians have perpetuated the myth of New France as developing almost into a *cultural métissage* of collaboration between the French, beginning with Jacques Cartier whose life was saved by drinking white cedar tea for its vitamin C content and Samuel de Champlain who treated them as allies. In contrast, franco-nationalist historiography underscores not just the greater levels of segregation in New England, but also the brutality of British troops in Québec during the Seven Years' War and the Patriots' Rebellions of 1837–1838.
66. Kara Kennedy points out Leto's conversation with Paul attributing his success to "an air of bravura" and "having a robust propaganda program"; *Frank Herbert's* Dune, 72. Villeneuve's casting of fan favorite Josh Brolin, whom fans might associate with his roles as George W. Bush in *W* (Oliver Stone, 2008) and as a corrupt CIA officer in Villeneuve's own *Sicario*, may, however, cast a shadow on the character of Gurney Halleck.
67. Pierre Nora, *Les lieux de mémoire*. 3 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1984–1992).
68. As Herbert's own son observes, "It is no accident that the pronunciation of 'Gesserit' and 'Jesuit' are similar, as he envisioned his [Irish Catholic] maternal aunts and the Bene Gesserit of *Dune* as female Jesuits;" Brian Herbert, *Dreamer of Dune: The Biography of Frank Herbert* (New York, NY: Tor, 2003), 21.
69. See Leigha High McReynolds, "Locations of Deviance: A Eugenics Reading of *Dune*," in *Discovering* Dune, 145–155.
70. See, for example, the historical works of Lionel Groulx, but also the novel, *L'appel de la race* (1922).
71. See Ransom, *Science Fiction from Québec*.
72. Frank Jacob, *The Orientalist Semiotics of* Dune (Marburg: Büchner, 2022).
73. In contrast with Jacob's critical reading, Arab Futurism scholar R. Ali insists that: "Frank Herbert's Dune saga features one of the most prominent uses of Arabic and Islamic material in science fiction history;" R. Ali, "Beside the Sand Dunes," 104. He documents Herbert's intensive study of the Arabic language, history of Islam, and of the *Qur'an* itself, and sees this interest and its reflection in *Dune* (1965) as a form of homage. Ali insists that: "The concept of Arab Futurism or 'Arabfuturism' is the expression of narratives that explore alternative pasts, and project ideas into a future where the Arab identity thrives. It looks at the past and present condition of the Arab world and envisions a future free of the hardships it faces. Frank Herbert's *Dune* explored this idea in the 1960s with his research of historical Arab events, applied to his futuristic setting;" R. Ali, "Beside the Sand Dunes," 105.
74. Jacob, *Orientalist Semiotics*, 18, 75–100.
75. Tembo, "Bi-lal Kaifa," 73.

76. In addition to Jacob, *Orientalist Semiotics,* see also: R. Ali, "Beside the Sand Dunes;" Higgins, *Reverse Colonization*, 47; Kara Kennedy, "Spice and Ecology in Herbert's *Dune*: Altering the Mind and the Planet," *Science Fiction Studies* 48.3 (2021): 444–461.
77. Conflicts between Islam and the West are even marginal to his historical drama, *Polytechnique* (2009), as the Shooter was the son of a Québécoise mother and a Muslim father who had "issues" with women and their rights/equality to men.
78. R. Ali, "Beside the Sand Dunes," 106.
79. Jacob, *Orientalist Semiotics,* 17–18.
80. As Edward Said underscores, this term was applied broadly by Europeans in the nineteenth century to North Africa and the Middle East; *Orientalism* (New York, NY: Vintage, 1979); see also his *Culture and Imperialism* (New York, NY: Vintage, 1993).
81. Maximilian Lau, "Frank Herbert's Byzantium: Medieval-Futurism and the Princess Historians Irulan and Anna Komnene," in *Discovering* Dune, 83–103.
82. In Herbert's novel, Liet Kines was the son of the first Imperial Planetologist sent to Arrakis, Pardot Kines, who "went native" and married a Fremen woman. In addition to changing Liet Kines's gender, he also changes Chani's identity by making her Liet's daughter. This is not the case in the novel.
83. Pérez, "What Do Zendaya's?," 17.
84. Pérez, "What Do Zendaya's?," 21.
85. Higgins, *Reverse Colonization*, 45–46.
86. Tim O'Reilly, Introduction to "Dangers of the Superhero" by Frank Herbert in *The Maker of Dune: Insights of a Master of Science Fiction*, Tim O'Reilly, ed. (New York, NY: Berkley Books, 1987), 95.
87. Pérez, "What Do Zendaya's?," 21.
88. Joel P. Christensen, "Time and Self-Referentiality in the *Iliad* and Frank Herbert's *Dune*. In *Classical Traditions in Science Fiction*, Brett M. Rogers and Benjamin Eldon Stevens, eds. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 161–162, 165.
89. Higgins, *Reverse Colonization*, 1.
90. Dalie Giroux, *The Eye of the Master: Figures of the Québécois Colonial Imaginary*, translated by Jennifer Henderson (Montréal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2023), 7.